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ABSTRACT

Problems arising in teaching drama to high school students stem from their lack of usable allusions--previous experiences and learning--which enable them to understand and appreciate any literary genre. In attacking this problem, one approach enables the student to cope by using two methods of association: reliance on emotional relevance and reliance on situational relevance. In attacking the problem of drama presentation, student acting proves ineffective in producing credibility. Student reading is more appealing to the student but fails when the average student must rely on his imagination, while student watching provides the most valuable learning method. Whether this latter method employs live performance, television, or videotape, students should be given background information before viewing the play, after which directed discussion and supplementary materials will help students to relate the play to life and other literature, thereby building up their banks of usable allusions. (JM)

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AN APPROACH TO TEACHING MODERN DRAMA

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AN APPROACH TO TEACHING MODERN DRAMA

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The title of my presentation, "An Approach to Teaching Modern Drama", is misleading, since I or anyone would be hard pressed to affirm the validity of one particular approach over the multitude of various approaches. Indeed, I am myself ambivalent toward the sundry approaches that I have used, and there have been times when what I had thought to be the most ingenious presentation has had no effect whatsoever on my audience of tenth graders. What I intend to do, then, is to examine several possible approaches, mentioning both their positive and their negative aspects, and to share with you an approach that I have found valuable.

The problem with teaching drama or any of the other literary genres is a problem that is most acute at the secondary level, and it may very well be the reason why a great number of students develop a negative attitude toward English early in their academic careers. Literature, like any other artform, is an associative medium. By this I mean that our understanding and appreciation of the literary work rely heavily on our ability to associate previous learning and previous experience with what we are currently reading. The associative nature of literature is problematic for the adolescent simply because he lacks the learning and experience that a writer expects him to associate with his work. The high school student lacks what I would refer to as a repertoire of usable allusions: he is experienced neither in life nor in learning and he must, therefore, approach a play or a poem as

a blank slate. How many times have you heard this comment from a student when you've asked him to evaluate something he's read or seen: "It was stupid." What the student is actually saying when you translate his crudity into meaningful language, is, "I am ignorant." Now, before you begin mentally attacking me for under-estimating the abilities of the modern teenager, let me explain that he is ignorant through no fault of his own, nor is it our fault that he doesn't know anything. If blame is to be assigned, I must assign it to his, and our, way of life. Our society reinforces lassitude and non-achievement. It is a society where watching is preferable to doing; the television is a symbol of this preference: we choose to watch others' experiences, the more bizarre the better, rather than to experience life for ourselves. You can argue for days this myth that today's teen is more involved, more aware. It is a myth, you know. Recent surveys in the school where I teach indicate that sophomores and juniors don't know Watergate from Billingsgate and have only a vague notion of where the Middle East is, let alone its significance in the modern world. Perhaps it is good that they don't know, but to assume that they will understand a work of literature without the benefit of associative knowledge is fatuous.

I have digressed more than I would have liked. We are concerned today with making education relevant. What is relevant? If we maintain that anything NOW or RIGHT ON is relevant, we are mistaken, for obvious reasons. Something is relevant if it has a counterpart in one's learned repertoire.

Since we are faced with the problem of teaching people who have a very limited learned repertoire, we must concede that little or nothing will be relevant to them unless we first build a bank of usable allusions from which they can draw. To be more concrete, we must teach more than the play or the poem. We must be prepared to inundate them with related materials for every work they read.

On the other hand, we cannot be walking libraries, nor can anyone expect us to spend all our free time inhaling ditto fluid. Because of the limitations placed on us by the unavailability of materials, we must resort to other tactics to achieve relevance. One workable approach is to make use of two methods of association with which the student should be able to cope: the reliance on emotional relevance and the reliance on situational relevance. Emotional relevance is determined by the question, "Have you ever felt like that character?" Situational relevance is determined by the question, "Have you ever been in a similar situation?" Neither of these questions provides a very scholarly approach to a literary work, but quite often they provide the only possible in-road to intelligent discussion. If a student can answer yes to either of these questions, he has proven to himself that he is not totally ignorant and that feelings and situations are two of the least painful association to recognize.

Which raises another problem: one that is unique to drama. We attempt to relate any literature that we teach to life. Certainly such a relationship is a necessity if one is to learn

anything from what he reads or if one is to see the value in a literary work. Drama can be the most difficult genre for a high school student to accept, since the nature of drama is inherently artificial and pretentious. Students find it difficult to take a play seriously, since it removes itself so from what they consider to be reality. Coleridge solved this problem for us by warning us to suspend our disbelief if we hope to derive anything of value from what we see performed on the stage. Students tend to view a play as no more than an elaborate fantasy that gives actors something to do with their time. They are not so naive as to believe that there really is a Brigadoon or that people in Oklahoma sing whenever they have something to say. Yet they are willing, after much persuasion, to suspend disbelief, and after disbelief is suspended the relationships between drama and life become more apparent.

The method of presentation is another problem in the teaching of drama. Which is more beneficial to the students, reading the text of the play, watching it acted on the stage, or acting it out themselves? I would argue strongly against the latter method for one reason: all the world may be a stage, but darn few of us are good actors. I can think of nothing more hideous than hearing Susie Student monotone her way through a part or Peter Pupil attempt to imitate Olivier and end up sounding like a chimney sweep. Such a presentation makes the problem of disbelief much greater.

There are good things to be said for reading a play as one

would read a novel. First of all, the format is appealing to the high school student; much indentation gives the illusion of less to read. Also, dramatic language is generally not terribly difficult, and any difficulty with words can be solved by putting the play down and going to the dictionary. The student is able to dwell on passages that he finds confusing and to flip back to earlier scenes to keep the characters straight in his mind. However, reading is more difficult than watching, since one must call on his imagination to visualize the characters and settings. I have found that when the average student calls on his imagination he usually gets a bad connection.

I recently surveyed my students' opinions on the subject and discovered, not surprisingly, that most of them would rather see a play than anything else. Watching requires less intellectual exercise than reading, and, as I have said before, we are a nation of watchers, not doers. But watching a live performance is not always possible, and the prospect of collecting money and chartering buses is enough to make any teacher decide to read the play instead. In the school where I teach, this problem has been partially solved by the extensive use of television in the classroom. Many fine plays are available on videotape, and they provide a method of presentation that is painless for both student and teacher. Nevertheless, television, too, has its drawbacks, not the least of which is the tremendous expense of initiating cable operations in schools that are strapped for funds.

The procedure that I generally follow has proven effective with all three methods of presentation, although it has been most effective when used in conjunction with plays that are seen either live or on television.

Before the play is presented, I spend no more than one class period broaching subjects that relate thematically to the play. Often a selection from a short story or an excerpt from a novel is helpful in priming the students for the particular concerns which will be voiced in the play. If the play relies heavily on one's knowledge of another work of literature (as with any of the modern plays based on classical subjects) or on one's familiarity with another period in history (as with The Crucible or The Price), I provide the students with a summary of or an excerpt from that work of literature or a brief history from that time period. If they are able to formulate relationships between the supplementary material and life in their own times, part of the problem of disbelief is licked.

The students then view or read the play, and I encourage them to take notes on those actions or scenes that they consider significant (very few students, I should add, can take worthwhile notes, but occasionally their scribblings are useful in discussion).

After viewing the play, I follow this procedure for discussion:

First, establish what happens in the play, that is, review the actions of the characters in the particular situations in which they are found. Quite often, especially with more recent plays, the student has difficulty grasping even this most simple level of interpretation, let alone the significance of the events.

Second, ask for an emotional reaction or gut response to the play. This question inevitably yields one negative response, usually verbalized, as I have said before, in one way: "It was stupid". Ignore the positive responses for the moment and put the dissenter on the spot. Why was it stupid? The student who must reply to this question is usually unable to do so, and it is relatively easy to turn the tables against him by demonstrating that it is his ignorance that makes the play seem stupid, not any flaw in the play itself. Such a table-turning generally gives you the upper hand and the attention of the dissenters who, unless they are refractory, conclude that their reaction to the play was probably based on the misunderstanding of the play.

Third, answer specific questions about the play, or, if none arise, ask your own about areas that you found particularly difficult. A few why? questions will usually get the ball rolling (Why don't Vladimir and Estragon just go away? Why does John Proctor delay revealing the children as frauds? Why does Wilder make the Webbs and the Gibbses such unbelievably "good" people? Why doesn's Liza Dolittle just tell Henry Higgins to buzz off?).

Fourth, determine the representational significance of the characters in the play. What qualities do they possess that can be found in real life? This is not the same as asking if the characters are realistic. What is real, after all, everything or nothing? Certainly drama is the most unrealistic artform, since the very nature of its presentation is preposterous--a group of people pretending they're something they're not, on an elevated platform, no less. Yet if the characters do not display certain qualities that are universally appreciable then there is no reason for their, or the play's, existence. Answers to questions about what the characters represent provide a backdoor approach to figurative level interpretation, and they also serve to suspend the students' disbelief.

Fifth, review the play for those particular actions or lines that serve to reveal or emphasize the representational importance of individual characters. Even those students who failed to pay close attention to the play are generally able to remember certain significant moments in the action, and, if the play is seen, are often able to recall significant gestures that the characters make. More astute students will recall entire lines from the play, and such recollections provide excellent opportunity for further investigation of individual characters.

Sixth, provide supplementary materials that help to relate the play to similar situations in life or literature. A quotation from a book, a reference to a short story or novel previously

read, an excerpt from a newsmagazine, a reference to a recent television program or motion picture—all help to make the play less artificial.

Finally, test the students' understanding of the play. It is important that the test measure both recollection and understanding. By understanding I mean not only why Vladimir and Estragon persist in waiting but also how their waiting relates to other literary, personal, and societal situations. I recently read a test on Our Town, which included this question (which was representative of other questions on the test): "What did George and Emily have to drink at Mr. Morgan's drugstore?" I suppose one could learn some transcendental lesson from knowing that they had cherry (I think it was cherry) phosphates, but such knowledge has no value that I can perceive beside reinforcing the students' conviction that George and Emily are incurable square teen-agers. And cherry phosphates are almost as far removed from the life of the contemporary adolescent as mead is from ours. Understanding makes drama memorable in a way that simple recollection does not.

I have attempted to share with you an idea or two that I have found useful in attacking the problems that present themselves in teaching modern drama to a roomful of people who would invariable prefer to be exercising their fingers in Typing or their arms in Gym than to be exercising their minds in English. If I have appeared to be skeptical of their intellectual abilities, it is only because I tend to be more realistic

than idealistic, more practical than visionary. High school students are, at best, only partially aware of their own potential. It is our task to save them from ignorance without stooping to it ourselves. Drama can be a bridge from their level to ours, but before we allow them to cross, we must be certain that the foundations are sturdy, or the bridge will crumble, and they will slip irretrievably from our grasp. I have referred to those foundations as a "bank of usable allusions". That bank should be the focus of all dramatic and literary study. Once it is solvent, we can look forward to more intense and exciting experiences in our classrooms.